

SPOTLIGHT

VIET NAM

Disasters, poverty and displacement

Viet Nam is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. More than 65 million people, or 70 per cent of the population, live in coastal areas and low-lying deltas exposed to typhoons, tropical storms and floods.¹⁴² The mountainous interior is also frequently hit by flash floods and landslides.

The combination of hazard intensity, high exposure and vulnerability puts the Vietnamese population as a whole at high risk of disaster displacement.¹⁴³ Our global risk model estimates that sudden-onset disasters are likely to displace an average of more than a million people in any given year in the future, giving Viet Nam the 4th highest disaster displacement risk ranking behind India, China and Bangladesh.

Ten disaster events caused 633,000 new displacements in 2017. Typhoon Doksuri caused 117,000 evacuations in the country's North Central administrative region in October, and typhoon Tembin 431,000 across southern provinces in December. Tembin was unusual in that its course was outside the usual typhoon trajectory. Typhoon Damrey, which occurred in November, caused only around 35,000 evacuations, but attracted significant media attention because it made landfall while the 2017 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit was underway in Viet Nam. Like Tembin, it struck an area unaccustomed to such ferocious storms, in this case the touristic Khanh Hoa province in the South Central Coast region of the country.

The fact that most of the displacement associated with disasters in Viet Nam in 2017 was in the form of pre-emptive evacuations is encouraging, but Tembin and Damrey point to the longer-term risks associated with the uncertainties of climate change. While it is difficult to attribute the characteristics of individual storms directly to climate change, these storms were in line with the government's official climate projections,



which forecast more frequent, intense and unpredictable typhoons, often on southerly tracks.¹⁴⁴

A single typhoon has the potential to destroy families' homes and crops, and rebuilding a modest 30 square-metre house to a standard that can withstand future storms costs about \$2,000 - a huge sum for rural farmers and foresters who often earn less than \$2 a day.¹⁴⁵ The cost of recovery on top of livelihood losses has the potential to plunge those affected into a cycle of unaffordable debt, which in turn helps to drive the rural to urban migration associated with Viet Nam's rapid economic transformation over the past 30 years.¹⁴⁶

Working-age members of families affected by disasters face pressure to look for work in provincial capitals and megacities such as Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh. Exact numbers are hard to come by, but population movements following disasters appear to be significant. According to Viet Nam's central statistics office, around 17,000 people, or one in 100 residents, left Kiên Giang province during and after drought in 2016.¹⁴⁷

Rural to urban displacement carries its own risks. All Vietnamese citizens have equal rights under the constitution, but in practice the country's household registration system - which determines access to social services, utilities, land and housing - creates barriers for non-residents, including migrants and IDPs. These impede poor families' access to benefits such as free healthcare and primary education, and unregistered and temporary migrants may be unable to access any services at all.



Flooding in Hoi An, the World Heritage site of Viet Nam. Photo: Shutterstock.com/ NguyenQuocThang, November 2017

Some cities, such as Ho Chi Minh, have relaxed their rules and taken steps to facilitate household registration, but significant obstacles remain.¹⁴⁸

Concern about the environmental sustainability of rural livelihoods is also growing. Viet Nam's provincial governance and public administration performance index (PAPI) for 2016 found that behind poverty and hunger, citizens ranked environmental concerns as the most urgent matters they wanted their authorities to address.¹⁴⁹

The government has begun in recent years to realise the importance of providing low-income groups with flood and storm resilient housing, and of promoting community-based approaches to disaster risk management. A national programme has helped more than 20,000 of the most vulnerable households build safer homes, and is now being improved and scaled up through Viet Nam's first Green Climate Fund project, a partnership between the United Nations Development Program and the government.¹⁵⁰

To be truly effective, however, safe housing needs to be combined with efforts to build resilience and better manage climate risk. As smallholders' farms continue to be divided, becoming smaller with each generation, targeted funding to support more efficient and diversified agricultural livelihoods and more integrated rural planning is essential to create the necessary resilience to climate impacts. So is the facilitation of safe and voluntary movement for those who want to undertake it.